

Learning from the New Deal for a Green Transformation: The importance of trade unions

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Abstract

The U.S. New Deal of the 1930s has become a broadly shared historical point of reference for a 'Green New Deal' of the 2020s. In fact, given the enormous, albeit very different, challenges faced by these two massive reform projects, it is worth taking a closer look not only, or primarily at what was done in the 1930s, but above all at how it was put into practice. The present article highlights some of the policy lessons to be learnt by the New Deal of the 1930s for the political and societal process that is necessary to drive forward a 'Green and Just Transition' today — in particular regarding the socio-ecological transformation of industry and the importance of trade unions in this process by the example of Germany.

Key words: New Deal, Green and Just Transition, socio-ecological transformation, trade unions

Introduction

The 1930s U.S. New Deal under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt has become a broadly shared historical point of reference for a ‘Green New Deal’ of the 2020s, albeit with very different subtexts.¹ True, in many cases this reference serves primarily as an advertisement banner. Nevertheless, it makes sense to think about potential lessons to be taken from the historical experiences of the New Deal.

It is obvious that the reform process in the United States of the 1930s was about very different things as compared to the challenges of climate change today. In 1933 to 1938 more than six million previously unemployed people were put to work building schools, playgrounds, kindergartens, roads, green spaces, and carrying out reforestation and landscape conservation; the banking sector was stabilised and regulated, and the stock exchange was put under state supervision; dam systems for the cultivation, irrigation, and electrification of entire regions were created with extensive infrastructure projects; the first attempts to establish elementary social standards regarding labour market regulation and the foundation of a welfare state were launched; and last but not least, thousands of cultural workers of various disciplines were promoted and brought art to the people.

It should be noted that at that time all this was a courageous experiment with economic and social reform strategies that had never been tried before. What is more, the New Dealers were facing extreme resistance by big business and right-wing campaigns. They could overcome this opposition by a virtually unparalleled democratic dynamic at a time when millions of people in Europe were cheering Mussolini and Hitler or were awestruck by Stalin. To be sure: today the challenge for any Green and Just Transition— or socio-ecological transformation, as it is called in Germany—is even much more fundamental than that facing the New Deal of the 1930s. A far-reaching rupture in economic and societal development and a powerful social dynamic has to be set in motion in a very short time. But this is precisely what the New Deal government succeeded in doing when the momentum of the first 100 days was translated into a farther-reaching reform process.

This is why there is much to learn, in particular with respect to *how* the New Deal was put into practice, rather than just looking at *what* was done. How could the New Dealers initiate a reform process that involved large parts of the society? What were the most important elements of this virtually unparalleled political and societal dynamic? In what follows, I will highlight some lessons to be drawn for the political turnaround required to push through a Green New Deal in the 2020s which are relevant for political and societal actors in general and trade unions in particular.²

¹ For surveys and discussions, cf., among others, Klein (2019) on the USA and EuroMemo Group (2020) on Europe.

² The following short review is based on my booklet on the lessons to be taken from the New Deal (Lehndorff 2020) which includes a more detailed description of the political dynamics in the course of those years. The comprehensive references to the literature provided there are largely omitted here for reasons of readability.

What was the policy approach of the New Dealers?

Immediately after taking office in March 1933, the Roosevelt administration began to put the promise of a 'New Deal for the American People' into practice with a huge reconstruction programme. Doing so, the government ventured into new territory that was completely unknown at the time. These were the key features of their policy approach:

The *first* typical characteristic was an undogmatic search for solutions. Nothing was excluded from consideration and measures were changed if they proved ineffective. To learn from experience and to correct errors, however, proved to be an extremely complex and conflictual back and forth maneuvering in some crucial issues such as public debt. Irrespective of occasional zigzagging between progress and relapse, this 'experimentalism' required strong, resolute government, that is: democratic leadership. It is obvious that Roosevelt's role as a both charismatic and democratic leader was of fundamental importance for the ability to break new ground. 'Roosevelt unlocked new energies in a people who had lost faith, not just in government's ability to meet the economic crisis, but almost in the ability of anyone to do anything' (Schlesinger, 2003, p. 22).

The *second* key element were large reform projects as landmarks of change. A major example of what you may call 'lighthouse projects' were highly symbolic large-scale infrastructure programmes. Always supported by an energetic anti-corruption agency, they included thousands of local construction projects as well as large-scale regional development programmes. A flagship here was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), whose innovative combination of central planning and decentralised participation increasingly succeeded in establishing electricity supply as a public task.

A *third* key feature was the—initially involuntary—readiness of the administration for conflict with economic and political elites. This readiness, in turn, could only be successful as it gave way to the *fourth* characteristic of the New Dealers' policy approach—the interaction and mutual reinforcement of public policies and social movements. The way the latter two approaches worked together with the first two ones mentioned can best be illustrated by the example of the fight for elementary labour standards.

Mutual reinforcement of government action and social movements

Shortly after taking office, the government launched the first large-scale attempt to introduce social standards in conjunction with the new employment programmes. A National Recovery Administration (NRA) was established to bring together business organisations, trade unions, and consumer associations to agree on minimum prices, minimum wages, maximum working hours, and the right to collective bargaining and unionisation. This 'keystone of the early New Deal' (Leuchtenburg, 1995, p. 56) triggered widespread public approval and large demonstrations of support under the banner of the NRA's patriotic Blue Eagle symbol. In fact, if with great difficulty, a number of agreements (mostly between NRA and employers' associations) were reached. With regard to social standards, however, this attempt soon

failed. The bosses of major industrial groups torpedoed their operational implementation, and in 1935 the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional.

This backlash was part of a greater political current. After initial support for the Roosevelt administration by sections of big business, the wind had now changed. Supported by 'anti-Bolshevik' campaigns in leading media, politicians (of both parties!) and heads of large corporations formed an 'American Liberty League' against minimum wages, collective bargaining, and the right to unionise. At the same time, a populist current sympathetic to European fascism grew up. In contrast to standard realpolitik practice, increasing resistance from various sides did not lead to attempts by government to appease and seek compromises. Rather, the government found a way out of the political crisis by being more resolute than in the first phase of the New Deal. It realised that 'self-regulation by industry doesn't work', as a member of the New Deal inner circle, the economist Gardiner Means (1970, p. 249), put it. The most important tailwind for a more offensive policy approach was an enormous strike wave, especially for the right to collective bargaining and unionisation. This dynamic, in turn, gave way to an upheaval of the substantially weakened U.S. trade union movement.

The story of this upheaval is meaningful and instructive. In the wake of the Great Depression trade union density had dropped to merely 6%. The majority of the leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AF of L), sticking to the tradition of craft unionism, followed the idea that government should keep out of labour issues. As Labor Secretary Frances Perkins—one the most important personalities pushing forward the New Deal—remembered, 'the thinkers of the AF of L were blind to future problems' (Perkins, 1946, p. 244).

In contrast, as early as 1933 a small minority amongst the union executives saw the NRA and in particular its clause that stipulated the right to collective bargaining 'as a golden opportunity to capitalise on government support' (Badger, 1989, p. 121). These oppositional unions launched the strike waves in combination with organising campaigns which were 'politically inspired' by the NRA (Fraser, 1989, p. 68). The new 'grassroots unionism', as it was called, ushered in a split of the trade union movement in the mid-1930s which gave rise to the formation of the Confederation of Industrial Organizations (CIO) with strongholds in mass production industries. Union membership rose from around two million in 1933 to over ten million by the end of the decade—with union density in manufacturing industries exceeding one third of all workers.

The fierce opposition of powerful economic and political interest groups on the one hand and the new, strengthened labour movement on the other encouraged the government to turn towards confrontation. It now aimed at a legally binding anchoring of social and employment standards and at creating the foundations of a welfare state, which were enforced by the National Labor Relations Act (the so-called 'Wagner Act') and the Social Securities Act in 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. For a better understanding of the political lessons to be taken from the New Deal the Wagner Act is particularly

interesting because it 'replaced NRA's statist code-making authorities with the philosophy of countervailing power' (Rauchway, 2008, p. 95). Thus, the bumpy road towards the anchoring of basic labour standards from 1933 to 1938 can be characterised as an interplay of government action and mass movements: first the NRA and the strike waves geared to take advantage of it, then the failure of the NRA that gave the crucial impetus to put the Wagner Act on the agenda, and eventually another—and now successful—strike wave geared to force big companies to apply the rules of the Wagner Act. It was an initially unintended and not foreseen process of mutual reinforcement of public policy and trade union action.

In the course of this process, the Roosevelt administration developed an enormous willingness to engage in conflict. It was not populist campaign bluster when the U.S. president uttered phrases like these in 1936, during his campaign for re-election: 'We know now that Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob. Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred' (Roosevelt, 1936).

This readiness for conflict shown by the New Dealers paved the way to the formation of a so-called 'Roosevelt Coalition' in the re-election campaign of 1936. It consisted of broad alliances of grassroots initiatives within and beyond the Democratic Party such as the Democrats' Women's Division, a 'Progressive National Committee' formed by prominent politicians and numerous mayors of different party affiliations, a broad-based 'Good Neighbor League' gathering members of the most diverse religious and ethnic minorities, and many cultural workers. Despite their harsh criticism of the administration's inconsistent fight against institutionalised racism many representatives of the African American population, traditionally pro-Republican as Abraham Lincoln's party, now publicly supported Roosevelt. Last but not least, the newly formed and rapidly growing industrial unions formed the 'Labor's Non-Partisan League'.

All these initiatives, alliances, and activities contributed to transforming the ethnic, religious, cultural, regional, and social diversity of U.S. society into a factor of strength. With over 60% of the vote, Roosevelt's landslide victory in 1936 was even greater than that of 1932.

In a nutshell, it was the administration's readiness to break new ground, to learn from experience, to establish flagship reform projects and to enter into political conflict which opened the door for the interplay of government policies and social movements. This interplay, in turn, drove the administration beyond its original targets.

All this will be equally crucial when it comes to pushing forward a socio-ecological transformation today. Thus, the message is simple and clear: It's about *learning* from the New Deal, not copying it, let alone just using it as an advertising slogan.

Green and Just Transition is highly political and full of conflicts

As mentioned earlier, the differences between the conditions and challenges then and now are enormous. Nevertheless, similar to some 90 years ago, what is at stake today is how to push for a political and social reform dynamic based on a mutually reinforcing interplay of government policy and countervailing societal power.

It is all the more important to bear this in mind as the socio-ecological transformation is often presented as primarily a technological and economic challenge. The terms 'socio-ecological' or 'green and just', however, already signal that this perception falls short. The transformation is linked to major social uncertainties that can very easily be used by reactionary deniers of the climate crisis for political blockades. It is therefore crucial to realise that the ecological can only work with the society, just as the social can only work with the ecological. Only if this connection is taken seriously the transformation can be perceived as a chance, rather than a danger, so that a social basis can be created for mastering the upcoming upheavals. It is highly relevant in all major policy areas of the Green and Just Transition (such as housing, transport etc.), but particularly urgent in the transformation of industry, which is the focus of the present article.

This is precisely where trade unions come into play. True, the economic and political challenges differ across countries, and the political and social importance of trade unions is also different in each country. In many cases, trade unions have lost considerable influence over the past decades of neoliberalism (Lehndorff et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is a commonality: without trade union involvement, it is difficult to imagine a progressive and dynamic connection between the ecological and the social. And even if this commitment must in many cases be made out of a situation of weakness and a lack of institutional rights, it still offers an opportunity, because the anticipatory, pro-active commitment of trade unions which is needed can strengthen the positive image of trade unions in a wider public, thus offering a steppingstone for revitalisation. Thus, as in the U.S. of the 1930s, a virtuous circle must be set in motion. In what follows, this challenge as well as first steps taken by the trade unions will be outlined by the example of Germany.³

Embattled building sites

There is a broad consensus not only among the relevant research institutions, but also among the most important political and social players in Germany about the technological cornerstones necessary to achieve the climate targets of the Paris agreement. At its core, it is always about three tasks: Providing climate-neutral energy sources, increasing energy efficiency, and increasing resource efficiency, i.e. reducing the demand for primary materials. In fact, a number of important political and economic decisions have been taken in this direction in Germany and even more so at EU level in recent years - albeit very late and in many cases by far not radically enough.

³ The following is based on my overview of a group of studies on socio-ecological transformation of German manufacturing industries (Lehndorff 2024a). Again, unless otherwise stated, references to the sources cited there are largely omitted here.

These efforts must be tackled or intensified in very different policy fields, such as infrastructure development, financial and industrial policy, regulatory law, labour policy or regional policy. Much of this is controversial, and as is to be expected when breaking new ground: Quite a few central questions are still open. The complexity of this process is due to the obvious fact that—if we take the example of manufacturing—the term ‘industry’ cannot simply be reduced on the production process. It includes the input of resources and the supply chain as well as the output, i.e. the products and their use. Hence the wide array of issues involved.

Just to give a flavour I will highlight three out of many other conflict-ridden ‘building sites’ of a Green and Just Transition which are particularly relevant for the unions both in manufacturing and the service sector.

To start with the example of *infrastructure development*, it is undisputed that the sufficient availability of green electricity is the be-all and end-all of all plans to decarbonise industry and the transport sector. The overall demand for electricity will be much higher than today's level because, just to give one example, the switch to hydrogen is very electricity-intensive in the chemical and steel industries. What is more, the production capacities for green hydrogen have to be created at home and abroad (a high proportion of green hydrogen will have to be imported). And all of this will only work if the grid infrastructures for both electricity and hydrogen are expanded massively and quickly at the same time. Added to this, it is obvious that the switch to e-mobility is extremely electricity-intensive, too, and can only succeed with a Europe-wide charging infrastructure. And let's not forget: the transformation of car traffic is not just about electrification, but also about reducing the number of cars, i.e. a mobility turnaround based on an expansion of public transport.

When it comes to master this huge infrastructure expansion, the overarching and particularly conflict-prone challenge—in addition to a reliable long-term regulatory framework⁴—is public financing.

Public funding also plays a central role in *industrial policy*. Significant additional investment and operating costs are incurred in important industrial sectors, which in many cases can only be covered by rising revenues after several years. These so-called market ramp-up costs are often unmanageable without state support, especially for SMEs, but in some cases even for large companies.

Finally, *labour policy* is a policy area that plays an important role in both infrastructure and industrial policy (Bosch, 2023). This is because the transformation is accompanied by structural upheavals in the labour market, which have very different effects on employment depending on the sector, activity, and region. The periods in which positive or negative effects can be expected will also vary greatly. This lack of clarity is causing many industrial employees

⁴ German industry associations rightly emphasise time and again the necessary ‘planning security’ that is required for medium to long-term investment decisions. At the same time, they try to torpedo binding market regulations in important areas such as the end of the authorisation of combustion vehicles in the EU—which alone could enable such planning security.

to worry about the future, and not without justification. The division of the labour market in Germany since the 1990s (cf. Lehndorff et al., 2009) has created an objectively uncertain and subjectively unsettling environment for the implementation of the necessary climate protection measures in industry and transport. Without a credible offer of realisable and positive alternatives, the danger of such fears being instrumentalised by the far right has to be taken seriously.

While the main players in the transformation process, i.e. governments and other state bodies, companies and their associations, trade unions and environmental organisations, now agree at least in principle on important strategic reorientations, differences of opinion and conflicting interests often erupt as soon as it comes to the question of how. In many of these controversies, it is not only environmental organisations but today (after sometimes difficult and controversial internal debates) also trade unions that take much more far-reaching positions than governments or business associations—in some cases jointly with environmental organisations.⁵ This can be shown using the example of the three ‘building sites’ presented here. The conflicts in these policy areas clearly show that a strong political commitment on the part of the trade unions will be of decisive importance for the success of the transformation.

Political commitment ...

The most controversial topic in Germany is *public budgets*. For example, the public investment required over the next ten years to achieve the climate targets is estimated at around 600 billion euros in a—remarkably enough— joint report by economic institutes with close ties to employers’ associations and trade unions (Dullien et al., 2024). The biggest obstacle here is the so-called ‘debt brake’ in the German constitution, which is basically more restrictive than the fiscal rules of the EU (which are largely due to pressure from German governments). This issue has become even more urgent after an extremely strict interpretation of the debt brake by the Federal Constitutional Court in November 2023 which has paved the way towards to the breakup of the German ‘traffic light coalition’ at the end of 2024.

As a parliamentary majority in favour of changing the constitution and abolishing the debt brake is not to be expected in the foreseeable future, the trade unions and an increasing number of economists including the IMF are calling for its reform or loosening. The unions together with environmental organisations go a step further and call for creating credit-based climate or transformation funds.⁶

⁵ For trade union positions, see e.g. Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (2024), IG Metall (2021a and 2024), Stiftung Arbeit und Umwelt der IG BCE (2024) which are representative of numerous trade union documents. For joint demands of trade unions and environmental organisations, see IG Metall / BUND (2020), AWO et al. (2021), ADFC et al. (2024). On the contradictory development processes of the positions of the industrial trade unions in the chemical, steel and automotive industries, see Bendel / Haipeter (2022) and Blöcker (2022a and b).

⁶ In 2022, a similar financial instrument was adopted by the German Bundestag for the rapid increase in defence spending in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

It should also be borne in mind that the expansion of public infrastructure—e.g. for the transformation of the mobility system, but even more so for the education sector—not only requires investment in tangible assets, but also significantly higher permanent personnel expenditure. An interesting example of joint action for highlighting this need has been the campaign for higher wages and better working conditions in the public transport sector over recent years organised by the service sector union ver.di together with Fridays for Future under the slogan ‘We are riding together’ (ver.di, 2023).

Such permanent staff costs should be financed through tax revenues, rather than loans. As demanded by the trade unions, this requires redistribution-based tax reforms. Such reforms are equally crucial for the social cushioning of the costs associated with the transformation for many private households with low and medium incomes.⁷

The trade unions are taking a similarly strong political stance in the area of *industrial and subsidies policy*. In view of the extensive support for private companies from public funds, the question arises as to what companies must provide in return so that risks and costs are not socialised and subsequent profits privatised, as has been usually the case to date. One example of trade union demands is the creation of a large credit-financed transformation fund (Stiftung Arbeit und Umwelt / IMK, 2021). The strategic private investments subsidised by this fund could be linked to conditions on climate-friendly technologies, production processes and products, as well as to conditions on job security, compliance with collective agreements and the expansion of co-determination rights for works councils.⁸ In addition, the state could secure participation rights in future profits or even build up investment assets. The European trade unions' demands for a reform of the ‘Next Generation EU’ investment programme—which urgently needs to be continued—in which compliance with social standards and the involvement of trade unions would have to be made mandatory (ETUC, 2024; Galgóczi, 2024) are aimed in the same direction.

This example makes it clear that such conditionalities are also an important lever for *labour policy*. The strategic importance of vocational education and (further) training for the just transition is undisputed, at least in principle. However, the question of how the division of the German labour market can be overcome in order to enable greater social security in the emerging structural upheavals is highly controversial. The steady decline in collective bargaining coverage over the past 30 years plays a key role here. An important demand of the trade unions is that all public procurement should be linked to the condition that the favoured companies comply with the collective bargaining standards of the respective sector. While there have been individual attempts at reform in this area more recently, another demand is facing even stronger resistance from employers' organisations and neoliberal-conservative parties: Making it easier for collective agreements to be declared generally binding. In principle, the EU's Minimum Wage Directive, which calls for national action plans

⁷ For trade union demands regarding public budgets see, among others, IG Metall (2021b).

⁸ The new IG Metall chairwoman, Christiane Benner (2023), summarised this demand in her inaugural speech at the trade union conference: ‘We need clear rules: Taxpayers' money only in return for a collective agreement, guaranteed employment and apprenticeships! Only then will there be funding, and not otherwise!’

to achieve 80% collective bargaining coverage, is providing a political tailwind here (Müller / Schulten, 2024). However, a binding and comprehensive implementation of the directive in Germany is not in sight. Overcoming the employers' blockade of declarations of general applicability by law is likely to be the most controversial cornerstone of the socio-ecological transformation in the area of labour policy.

The examples outlined here from the areas of infrastructure, industrial and labour policy show that trade unions must develop (!) an enormous capacity for political conflict if they want to influence the pace and direction of socio-ecological transformation. The word 'develop' emphasises that political commitment goes far beyond resolutions passed at trade union conferences. For trade unions in particular, therefore, it is important be aware of the link between the capacity for conflict 'at the top', i.e. on the political stage, and the capacity for action 'at the bottom', i.e. at company and regional level.

... with a foundation at the workplace

Strengthening the ability to act in bread-and-butter activities on the one side and political commitment on the other are always two sides of the same coin. The better a union is anchored at company, establishment and sectoral level, the greater the chances of being taken seriously as a political player. And vice versa: the greater the political standing of the trade unions in the public eye, the more convincingly they can mobilise at the workplace.

This connection applies to the socio-ecological transformation, too, as can be shown by the emerging challenges and —most importantly—first (!) practical steps on this path.⁹

In the transformation process, two levels are particularly important for strengthening trade union capacity to act 'from below': the company level and the regional level. At *company level*, it is important to develop prospects for 'green jobs' of the future in key industrial sectors. Experience shows that many companies are trying to stick to existing business models for as long as possible. This may still be profitable in the short term, but it is far from sustainable and offers employees no prospects. However, there are numerous skilled both blue- and white-collar workers in the companies whose knowledge and experience can be utilised for developing alternative product strategies. This is particularly important in those industrial sectors that are likely to be most affected by the transformation, such as the automotive supply industry, where new prospects for the 'green jobs of the future' must be developed. This is even more important against the backdrop of the crisis of the German and European automotive industry.

This is where so-called 'future collective agreements' come in, which IG Metall has concluded in a number of companies (Bosch, 2024). Their basic idea is to go beyond usual defensive elements focussing on job security in combination with, for example, reductions in working hours and pay, and to offer works councils new opportunities for initiatives regarding future

⁹ For the following see Lehndorff (2024b).

decisions that go beyond their legally guaranteed co-determination rights well in advance of future upheavals and crises. To this end, works councils—also with external support—can organise workshops at company or establishment level geared to mobilise blue- and white-collar workers' expertise for the development of ideas about potentials for sustainable production in the future.

Such company agreements are sometimes reached cooperatively, but sometimes only after tough disputes. Similarly, the experiences to date with the practical implementation of 'future collective agreements' are also very different, and this is for several reasons. Obviously, even the best ideas from employees will have no effect if employers do not take note of them due to short-term interests, and even more so as from many employers' points of view, this kind of initiative is not part of works councils' remit (which is why trade unions are calling for extended legal co-determination rights on these issues). But equally important is that the debate about alternative production options is a completely new territory for most works' councils. A transformation-oriented works council policy with genuine participation therefore requires both internal trade union training and sufficient resources. On this bumpy road, 'future collective agreements and practical experiments with local 'transformation workshops' offer important starting points for gaining experience and developing the ability to act. The first steps on this difficult path are being taken here.

There are similar difficulties and inspiring experiences at the second level of basic activities, the *region*. In particular, regions that have so far been characterised by so-called 'brown jobs' are facing considerable and difficult to predict restructuring. Innovative regional stakeholder networks are needed to devise alternative development strategies. It is important to develop common guiding ideas and joint projects in order to be able to utilise public funds strategically.

This is where publicly funded 'Regional Transformation Networks' formed on the initiative of IG Metall come into play. In these networks, an exchange on the future of the region is organised among a large number of stakeholders, with offers for small and medium-sized companies on issues of technological innovation often playing the largest role. On the part of IG Metall, as its former chairman put it, such networks are also associated with the political hope of 'being able to create new alliances through debates about regional perspectives and to implement them locally' (Hofmann, 2023, p. 378). In many networks, however, there is still a long way to go to achieve such targeted cooperation on an equal footing, and trade unions and works councils in particular often still lack the 'necessary access to professional and financial resources' (Hoßbach / Bollwein, 2024, p. 54).

This is new territory for everyone involved but is particularly challenging for trade unions and works councils. However, the experience which is being gained here is extremely valuable and will be indispensable for further green and just transition. This is why intra-union exchange on this experience will be crucial, as well as accompanying and comparative

research.¹⁰ The articles in the present issue of the European Journal of Workplace Innovation are designed to contribute to this exchange.

Today, the initiative comes from below

The most important thing we can learn from the New Deal for a 'Green New Deal' is the importance of mutually reinforcing state and societal action. What was important in the 1930s for enforcing minimum social standards is all the more important today.

As already mentioned, in 1933 ff. oppositional union leaders saw the New Deal 'as a golden opportunity to capitalise on government support' (Badger, 1989, p. 121). In other words, the government seized the initiative, important sections of the business elite opposed it, which was in turn met with massive strike movements by ever larger sections of the trade unions, and this led to even more determined government action, eventually resulting in groundbreaking social legislation.

It is more than obvious that this political dynamic was markedly different from the one we see today. Unlike in the 1930s, today the initiative comes from social actors and not from governments. The fact that in a number of countries trade unions have become part of social activities for a 'Green and Just Transition' should be seen as a major step forward. As the examples of trade union initiatives and of joint demands by environmental organisations and trade unions presented above show, things get moving, but we are at the very beginning of this process. Political pressure on governments can only develop from such activities. And if this bears fruit and governments become—or remain—active in environmental policy, this can influence the political climate and, in turn, encourage social movements to maintain or further intensify their pressure.

The example of Germany has shown that the political weight of trade unions is needed in the conflicts over political decisions on major 'building sites' that are crucial for the progress of the transformation process. At the same time, it is obvious that this political weight depends very much on how they are anchored locally with their demands. The more unions become drivers of transformation at company and regional level, the greater their ability to assert political demands and the greater their chances of being taken seriously as political actors. And vice versa: the greater the political standing of the unions in the public eye, the more convincingly they can mobilise at the workplace. Progress in each of these areas gives each other a tailwind.

First steps on this bumpy road have been taken at all these levels. After all, the transformation is a medium to long-term process with many uncertainties and great potential for conflict. And this transformation has only just begun.

¹⁰ For currently ongoing research on local and regional initiatives of trade unions and works councils see for example <https://www.uni-due.de/jaq/projektinfo/transformationen.php>.

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